

God is beside us through everything

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

The approach to Romans 6: Round 2; *dying and rising*.

Gen 22 1-14, Rom 6 12-23, Matt 10 40-42

I realise that the story of Abraham and Isaac leaves us all pretty shocked – and we can't discuss it much now. All I want to say about it today is to tell you about the most powerful encounter I've ever had with this terrible, bewildering story. It was in the Holy Sepulchre Church in Jerusalem, in the twin chapel of Golgotha/Calvary – revered as the site of Jesus' crucifixion. After praying at the altar, I turned to go, but suddenly saw a huge mosaic on the wall. It depicts the moment where Abraham is standing over Isaac with his knife raised, and the angel stops him.

The connection between that story and that place – where this time, the only Son was not spared – struck me with extraordinary force. Jesus and Isaac knew the same terror; God and Abraham knew the same grief.

The mysteries of sacrifice and grace are a theme to savour in today's readings. But for the moment, we return to our series on Romans. In the readings from Romans 6, both last week and this morning, Paul teaches on the one hand that death is the consequence of sin – alienation from God. And on the other hand, Jesus offers life by the gift of his death and resurrection. Let's remember how Paul got us here.

In the earlier chapters, Paul said sin alienated everyone from God. ^(3.9) God addressed this not by punishing us, but by coming to us in Jesus Christ. God's grace was shown by Jesus coming to be with us *as we are*. There was no precondition that we be

acceptable before he'd come for us. So we heard in ch 5 that *God proved his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.* ^(5.8)

God's astonishing act of solidarity – of atonement (at-one-ment) with us – was something Paul described as God's free gift to us of justification/righteousness ^(5.18-21). We often think of *justification* as something we do; defensively justifying ourselves. But Paul is using this expression as something *God* does; not us – it's a free gift God offers us. Do we trust ourselves to take hold of that gift?

Justification and righteousness have a lot to do with ethics, but actually they're more about orientation – the direction we face in. When we write or type something and we rule up our work or set the margins to make them line up, we say we're justifying the margins. That's very close to what Paul means by justification; having God there in Jesus by our side. When we walk beside Jesus, and we face the same way he does, gradually, we're re-oriented; we see things more and more the way Jesus sees them. Our perspective matches that of Jesus, and gradually, so does our life. Paul describes this in today's reading as our being sanctified. ^{6.19, 22}

In giving us this attention, Jesus is saying we're trustworthy, that we belong and that we are not just acceptable, but deeply cherished. When you have a companion who is so affirming of you, you cannot but respond with warmth. But as this has to do with Jesus' death and resurrection, it's hard for us to grasp, isn't it.

There's an insight that came to me years ago in hospital. When we're on our own cross – in hospital or in despair or in loneliness, wondering where God is – we can look to our side and see our God beside us in Jesus, there on that friendly neighbouring cross of his. Let's hear Karl Barth again – '... the one who justifies another takes their side and sees that

all is well with them. God takes the lost cause of humanity and makes that cause his own in Jesus Christ.'

Remember, *God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.* ^{Rom 5.8} God got alongside humanity in Jesus to justify us; to turn our lives around; to show us which way to face by standing beside us and facing that way. And in Jesus, God stands by us particularly in our times of suffering; right to the end, helping us know which way to turn to find healing and wholeness.

God loves us, and always has. God is beside us through everything. So let's take any blinkers off, and sense God beside us; see which way to turn.

Paul asks if when we've recognised God doing all that for us, are we free to go on living in alienation from God, if that's what we want. ^{6.1-2, 15} Paul says no; it's ridiculous. It's like being cured of lung cancer and then resuming packet-a-day smoking.

Paul reminds us the meaning of our baptism; *we've been buried with Jesus by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.* ^{6.4} Things are different now. We've got this new life, what can we make of it this time. (A friend who survived a house fire and a year in the burns unit asked God why. What was this new life for? Suddenly, his very humble, ordinary life was blessed with a mysterious new purpose to seek out and live.)

Jesus has given each of us a new life; in our baptism, we have died to our old self and emerged, born again into a new life. Our new Christ life transforms us; the primary call of those born again is to be sanctified – to become Christ for our neighbours. We have each been ordained for this at our baptism; every one of us.

This ordination calls us to live decent, kind lives. But not out of fear of punishment. Rather, we do so out of gratitude for the free gift of new life; gratitude for the ongoing, transforming gift of Christ's company with us every step of life's journey. This is not a burden, it's a celebration of the free gift of God – eternal life in Christ.

So what are we going to do about it, now that we know we're all ordained for ministry? At one level, the answer is as diverse as we are, but I do think there's a first principle that today's gospel (Matt 10.40-42) gives us. Jesus said, 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.' People who meet us are meant to meet Jesus in us. That's the point of the sanctification that Paul wrote about.

It's up to each of us to offer up those characteristics of ours which need changing. Good friends will help us discern them. But many of them can be washed away by adopting an attitude of gratitude – that's easy to remember isn't it. Grateful people are generous, glad, inspiring, humble, kind, loving – Christ-like. Let's wake up each day and seek to be mindful of what we're grateful for.

Finally, the other thing about sanctification is that it isn't just about me or you as individuals, but about *us*. Paul wrote this letter to a *community*, and as much as he exhorted people to offer themselves to be sanctified, it's fairer to say that he was exhorting a community to receive this transformation. So how do we, St John's, need to develop, to *walk in newness of life*? It's something that requires a community self-audit, isn't it. So watch this space. Amen